

# Back to a brighter newer shopping future?

Several announcements in 2005 have turned Orchard Road into the most-talked-about redevelopment in the region, Mardiana Ismail finds out whether Singapore's shopping mecca will really change and, if so, how soon.

As seasons and societies change, so do politics, developments and districts, racing constantly keep up with the times, yet vulnerable to the demands of the economy. In the case of Orchard Road in Singapore, much remains to be seen as to whether the redevelopment of the shopping street will be merely cosmetic additions to the infrastructure already in place, or a thorough cultural and intellectual overhaul of the mindset of developers and building owners.

In December 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong challenged urban planners, builders and architects to set new standards and transform Singapore into a global city, one with an X-factor to put it on the retail map.

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Hygiene, practicality and efficiency were no longer the only prerequisites for planning, creating and managing the city skyline and streetscape. Instead newer, bolder development concepts were called for, planning and building restrictions were relaxed in order to promote an aesthetic aim, the purpose of which is to achieve what he termed 'excellence but not ostentation or false grandeur'.

## starting on orchard

In light of this, the makeover of the country's prime shopping belt on Orchard Road is a very challenging task, primarily for the developers and building owners.

Not only will they have to contend with a mixture of tenants who have various brand sensibilities and economic concerns, they will also bear the brunt of planning restrictions. To make the changes, building owners will need to move away from the unapproachable, homogeneous and safe styles that have characterised existing

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buildings. Even slightly newer developments – such as Ngee Ann City - lacked the open façade and welcoming exterior to draw in pedestrian traffic.

## more options for developers

With the redevelopment efforts taking place, Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has relaxed some façade and mall extension guidelines. These include allowing building-owners to connect and integrate shopping floors of adjacent buildings to create larger shopping floors. Older malls such as Wisma Atria and Paragon created a slightly more eclectic streetscape by opening up the property on to the street, offering alfresco dining and glass walls to display more of their tenants' offerings.

There are many views on what could work when it comes to the Orchard Road makeover. City Developments says "let the buildings go higher". John Ting of A.I.M & Associates says encourage more tropically-sensitive designs by giving incentives for balconies. Many would like iconic sculptures to replace traditional shoebox architecture. Yet there are others – architect Tay Kheng Soon for instance – who champion the need to retain the integrity of Singapore's original landscape in the face of pressure for radical change. Offering an 'if it is not broke, why fix it?' argument.

## retailers must make an effort

However, facade renovation and transparent walls are just the first step to transforming Orchard Road into an authentic and distinct shopping district, like Harajuku in Tokyo or Soho in New York City. Saxone Woon, Managing Director, Immortal Design – a rebranding consultancy that has worked with many malls - thinks that much of the spirit of these locales lie in the ethos created by the retailers in the surroundings, rather than just the surroundings themselves.

He feels that with redevelopment efforts ongoing, this is not just an opportunity for them to redesign and repackage their existing image and offering, but to take it one step further.

"They should first have the vision of what Orchard Road is to be or wants to be, and then have the capacity to re-design their space or re-position their stores in light of this." That is retailers must also be aware of tourist and other discerning markets, and their expectation of a consistent and rewarding retail experience.

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To invest in such a re-branding package, retailers will need their landlords to provide infrastructural support and also to share the same mindset for the overhaul. Woon says that it would be the responsibility of the building owners and developers to first develop the vision. He says they “should provide an external environmental design to facilitate the shopping experience”. This would include allowing for “good pedestrian traffic flow in and out of the building, a good design plan for the mall facade and interior and lastly mapping out special events and promotional efforts to enhance these new experiences for the consumers.”

### **encouraging a more eclectic retail mix**

Recreating Orchard Rd with a more eclectic retail mix may prove the elusive X-factor, transforming the street into one that will attract significant global attention.

Woon says: “Good public relations, marketing and advertising campaigns are key when it comes to landlords helping tenants. Tenants will be attracted to landlords that know what they are doing and what they want.”

### **getting a piece of the action**

Unfortunately, interested companies who supply building design products and related services may not initially play a strong part in the redevelopment venture. Woon thinks suppliers are not “the right ones to approach owners to tender for work. Applications and installation will only come into place after a proper design direction and plan has been worked out.”

### **doubts countered by Orchard Turn-around**

Not everyone was confident that the much-mooted grand and idealistic visions would come about. Then Orchard Turn, opposite Wheelock Place, whose prime location and potential for place-making were its primary selling-points, was released to developers.

Vivienne Tan, General Manager, Centrepoint Properties, believes that the mall may be just the kick-start needed for Orchard Road to slowly renew itself. Other mall-owners and developers may respond in a similarly aggressive manner when such an outstanding competitor is in their midst. In fact, the mall will be

smaller than Ngee Ann City, although at 218 metres high, its apartment complex will tower over its neighbours, Singapore Marriot Hotel and Meritus Mandarin. Retail analysts at commercial real estate firm CB Richard Ellis agree that the new retail developments at Orchard Turn and Sommerset are “expected to liven up the already vibrant Orchard shopping belt”.

The challenge may be somewhat limited because the tenderers, co-developers Capitaland and Hong Kong’s Sun Hung Kai Properties, are still subject to certain expectations as part of the overall Orchard Road rejuvenation masterplan. Upfront strictures on the new development state that at least 40 percent of the 1.35 mil sqf maximum gross floor area must go towards retail entertainment and food and beverage outlets. There must also be an observation deck on one of its top three floors.

While this may sound like an exciting new treat for Singaporean and tourist shoppers alike, it may or may not be enough to create a truly iconic building. Regardless, a mall is more than just its exterior and the Turn is still hot property. Tan is “almost convinced that there is a long line of new and existing retailers willing to pay sky high rentals so they can make lots of money”, due to the bullish nature of the co-developers of Orchard Turn.

“Standing still is not an option, if we are to compete with neighbouring countries, and the world. The most obvious way is through new developments, with the hope that older facilities will upgrade or be redeveloped to keep up with the competition.”

Agreeing with Woon, Tan adds that “mall developers must almost predict trends so that they can build the right type of facility, attract the appropriate tenants and market itself cohesively to the targeted market.”

### **a long road ahead**

Meanwhile, the Orchard Road Business Association (Orba) – a group made up of developers, retailers and restaurant and hotel-owners in Orchard Road – has remained true to the mission of the redevelopment by submitting a draft proposal to the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), the governing body of the Orchard Road redevelopment project.

### **specific requests**

Orba’s requests for the \$40 mil budget allocation include facade lighting, installation of water and power-points for greater ease of organising street events, more benches and resting areas to encourage walking along the promenade and signs to provide a clear map of the shopping district. STB has responded by saying that most of the items on the list are being studied and efforts are being made to accommodate these recommendations.

Ultimately, all these suggestions and ideas remain intellectual, calculated guesswork. The elusive international X-factor buzz is bestowed at the mercy of the well-travelled shopper, whose ever-changing tastes and expectations dictate the development of the local retail industry. Until the Christmas 2008 completion of Orchard Turn, developers and tenants alike can only monitor the pulse of market developments and trends, continuing to work together through innovation. **RFP**